Cosmic Redemption Ephesians 1:15-23 Apr. 24 '66

The Adult Church Sch. class has been studying the book of Ephesians for the past several weeks, and last Sun. the discussion turned to the point of predestination and election. Now, anyone who has attended that class with a little regularity knows that sooner or later the discussion will get around to predestination, no matter when it began, ~~although~~ and, admittedly it is difficult to read much of the NT esp Ephesians and avoid the question. ~~But~~, the fact that we keep returning to it tells me three things. First, it is important to us--it perhaps is a watershed in what feels like a threatening world hurtling toward disaster. Second, we don't understand it--or know what exactly we believe about it. ~~Thirdly~~ Third, it is an important part of the Christian religion. Of these three--the third is most true. Unfortunately Presby. have been saddled with the doctrine and are usually given sole responsibility for its origin and propogation. But the truth about Predestination is that it is an important Biblical theme--one which runs throughout the Old and New Test. and it is no more the property of the Presbyterian tradition than the assertion that there is one God and not one hundred.

And yet there are times when I wish the word predestination had never been coined. The concept, the idea which it is meant to indicate is absolutely essential to the Christian faith--but it never seems to be this concept which comes across when Predestination is discussed. The word has, over the years, collected a whole load of other meanings, all of which serve to strip it of its original intent. For instance, say the word "Predestination" to the average laymen and immediately he begins to think in terms of God willing his job, wife, number of children and physical well being. Or another person will think in terms of God causing this plane

accident--or this fall down the stairs. Another person will think in terms of God causing ~~the death of this person~~ someone's and will derive comfort--and if not comfort--at least some answer from the position that it was the will of God. That is--predestination usually means determinism--that God causes everything to happen that happens--weddings as well as wars; murders as well as birthdays. This is not a doctrine that can be forced to coincide with the Bible--it is not what Paul--or the other early Christian writers had in mind. It is basically, a pagan doctrine that puts everything that happens into the hands of a mysterious cosmic force--andmakes of man little more than a puppet. Yet it persists, and I suppose alwayswill.

In thinking about a new way to approach the question of predestination I came up with two further questions which will help to lead into it and hopefully help to provide some sort of an answer. The first is--what was the particular religious--historical situation that prompted the Reformers to ~~reformulate~~ restate the doctrine and make it such a cornerstone of Protestant thought? The second is--simply--what is reigion"- What is the purpose of religion? Specifically, what is the nature and purpose of the Christian religion?

John Calvin is the one who did themost to formulate the doctrine of Predestination as it has come down to us and Calvin was a reformer. The Reformers in turn, were reacting and rebelling against the way the ~~Roman C. was~~ Gospel of was being interpreting the ~~Gospel~~ in the 16th cent. A.D.

Simply stated--Christianity for the 16th cent. churchman was a matter of doing good things which ~~men~~ were prescribed by the church--and which, when done would have the effect of winning a man a place in heaven instead of hell. Some of these good things were making pilgrimages, saying the rosary, attending confession and the mass and buying indulgences. The skeptics of the age were quick to point out that all of these exercises had been created and prescribed by the Church; none of them were in the Bible--and so it

could be speculated that in another place--at another time the Church could prescribe head hunting as a work sufficient for salvation. In fact the tragic story of the crusaders comes close to this--as Christian men went out to slaughter the heathens--and were promised God's salvation for their effort.

In any case, stated in its very simplest terms the Prot. Ref. was a rediscovery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ--the fact that in Jesus Christ God had acted to redeem the world; that salvation had been given to man as a gracious gift; that God had already given man what the Church was trying to make him earn. The reformers rediscovered the basically good news that God had taken the initiative--that the requirements for salvation were already fulfilled by God himself--and that man's efforts to do more--to win it and earn it only resulted in spiritual pride and a false sense of self righteousness.

Calvinand the reformers called for men to accept what God had done for them--and to live in grateful, response to it. They wanted men to worship not to please God--but to praise him. They wanted men to love each other not to win salvation--but because God had acted in love. They wanted men to pray--not in order to persuade God to do something--but to thank him for that which he had already done.

Now had the reformers stopped here everything would have been all right. But they did not. They went further. If God had acted to redeem all men--why weren't all men Christians? If God's gift of salvation was for all men--why didn't everyone believe? The logical answer was that God wanted it that way; that he elected and chose some men for salvation and others for damnation. Thus we have the second aspect of the doctrine--and the one that stops most of us in our tracks.

I wish the Reformers hadn't gone quite that far--for in this they too stepped outside the Biblical frmework that prompted them to be reformers in the first place. But they were men of logic--they were not noted for their intellectual modesty; they believed that everything could be explained rationally--cause and effect. And so if God had redeemed all men--and some men didn't appear to be effectdd by it--or to believe it--it follows logically that that's the way God wanted it.

It is precisely this point of their theology that we find offensive and rightly so. Man is a great deal less man, stripped of his freedom of will. We believe that every men--can if he choses--say no to God--and whether that no to God lands him in eternal demnation is God's business and not ours. And so we can reject this part of the doctrine of predestination as it has come to us--but at the same time we need to see that the reformers were focusing on the real thrust of the Gospel--that is, that God has acted to save men--to give them salvation--and that there is nothing man can do to earn that gift.

Now, in forcusing their thinking and Prot. thinking ever since on this point, how valid were they? This leads to the second question- What is religion--its purpose and intent? What is the Christian religion?

The history of man's religion's is the story of man stiriving for three things; knowledge of God; security; and eternal salvation. Religion has been man's concerted and often bizarre attempt to cope with and influence the creator. The ancients lookd at the sun and moon and intuitively felt the life force in the universe; and so they built fires and chanted and danced hoping to influence that life force to be benevolent to them. Sometimes they sacrificed one of their own for the same reason. The religon of the ancient Jews often deteriorated to the same degree. The law had been given to structure man's responsee to God--but it too became merely the means through which men extered an influence over the creator. At times

the Jews felt that if they were obedient they would be prosperous; which is only another way of saying that if you dance three times around a tree the rain will fall. So R.C. in the 16th cent. and ~~Prot.~~ in the intervening years has corresponded to this traceable pattern of man's religions.

For the 16th cent. Christian, God was influenced by obeying the canon law of the Church; and the result and intent of obeying was admittance into heaven. For the Prot. it is still going to church-avoiding all the nasty things the church has labeled as sins-and the motivation remains; to influence God to be benevolent to us now, and if he can't do this-to at least give us our reward when we die. In this context the church becomes the institution for those who are worried about eternity-a basically selfish concern-and has absolutely nothing to say to the man who simply isn't worried about his destiny.

But what if the creator God, on his own initiative has already given an answer to the original motives for religion? What if God has already revealed himself-thus ending man's search for knowledge of him? What if God has acted to redeem man in the present--to make him secure and comfortable in what appears to be a hostile world? What if God, on his own, has already taken care of man's destiny-giving hm eternal life and salvation.

Then there is no longer any need for religion as it has been historically defined. This is what the N.T. book of Ephesians is saying. This is what the Reformers were saying. This is what contemporary theologians like the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer are saying when they tlk about "religionless Christianty" But, most important of all this is what God was saying in J.C.

According the writer of Eph. God has redeemed all men; listen again to his soaring description of Christ; "he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church." It doesn't say--he

has put somet things under his feet" In another letter Paul did not say "God was in Christ reconciling some men to himself" nor good men-no churchmen; but "god was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" the whole world!

This is what we mean by predestination; that God, before time began, planned to redeem mankind; that he had destined all men to be his sons; that he had acted in Jesus Christ to do this and it has been done. This is the meaning of predestination.

And what of the person who stands outside the body of the Church? Is it wrong to say "I don't know?" at this point? Is is wrong to say that that God's concern? Is it wrong to believe the N. T. writ4rs were serious where they claimed that God has redeemed all men-and reconciled the whole world to himself/

It may not be worng, but it is a dangerous doctrine: it is a radical idea - because it assults our pride. It is dangerous because many of us are Christins for the wrong reasons. Basically we feel we are doing two things in the church: we are providing for our salvation and we re doing God a favor by helping out in his favorite project. In short, we aee engaged in the practice of traditional religion.

We can't seem to shake the idea that somehow our salvation is the result of something we have done or are now doing. Within this context it is natural for us to feel superioir to the person who is not doing what we are doing. But more to the point, if this is what we beleive - if truly believe we are earning our heavenly reward by being in the church, we are seriousiy threatened by this Christian doctrine - that God has given us the gift we are expending so much of our time, energy and money to earn. That idea cuts the bottom out of our practice of religion: we are left with no motives. What's the sense in itall if everyone is redeemed: if God loves and has acted to save all men, why not forget about religion and the church?

It is at this point, this trying, upsetting moment on integrity that we become vulnerable to something else also - to the re llyy Good news of Jesus Christ. It is at this point that

we can begin to see - perhaps for the first time - what Christianity is. It is a point at which we can discrd religin and start becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.

This can be a freeing transforming experience. There is power in the knowledge that God has redeemed us. There is freedom in knowing that I no lomger have to live out my life trying to gain something I've already been given. There is a whole new approach to the church. No longer do I have to serve in it out of sense of obligtion born of fear and anxiety. No longer do I have to belong to it in order to get my name on the roll up yonder. Suddenly church membership can become a beautiful, joyful response - a thing I do out of love and thanksgiving to the God who has loved and redeemed me. Suddenly my approach to the person who stands outside the church is radically transformed: no longer is it merely a matter of trying to convince him to do the things I am doing so that he can get to heaven. Rther it becomes a joyful announcing of the good news - a telling that in Jesus Christ God has redeemed him - and that the way to acquire salvtion - is to begin to live in ccordance with the fct that it has already been given. When a person knoews this - when we successfully communicate this to him - instead of looking down our noses at him - he will become a joyful, obedient member of the body of Christ.

Now I have no illusions that htis will for all time clear up the matter of predestination You will continue to ask , and I will continue to respond to your probing questions. But in our thinking together let us remember the cosmic aspect of redemption: the good news of Christianity that God has destined, before time, all men to be his sosns- ans that he has acted to meke them his sosn in Jesus Christ. Let us remeber the Gospel - best stated by the Apostle: "He has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

AMEN

4/24/66

We lift up our hearts unto thee, our Father, in song and in prayer: we have come here looking for thee, and if not for thee - for something that will undergird us - something to give us strength & comfort & meaning. We have presumed that thou art in this place - and that by coming here we will find thee. Quiet our minds O God, still the vain seeking of our hearts: make us to be still and to know that thou art God: In the silence come to us - Find us: as we search - lift up our seeking and be present among us. As we pray - speak to us. Give us repentant & believing hearts - through J.C. our Lord.

Let us give thanks - let us pray silently: For life and health - For homes & ~~daily~~ daily bread we give thanks, O God. For all the goodness of life - we are truly grateful. Grant us thankful hearts - For these things thou hast given us - and for the great gift of thy love. - through J.C. our Lord

Let us pray for others - silently: We have not always loved our neighbors as our selves, Our Father. We have not cared to discover our neighbor - we have not opened our minds to those about us - and those all over the world who are thy children. - We are sorry, our father. And yet we pray for them - for them we love - and for them we cannot love: for those whose need we know - and for those whose need we have avoided hearing - through J.C. - who knows - and meets our need.

Let us pray for the Church - silently: Through thy church, O God - we have committed our lives - as servants & stewards. Like millions of others we have promised - and failed. And yet we return here - knowing it is thy church - and we are thy people. We pray for the Church - for this congregation - and for the church missional - through it - our Lord - our J.C.

O Eternal & almighty God, we rejoice at this opp. to worship thee. We rejoice that thou hast called us into this Fellowship with thee & with each other. Give us thy guidance & discipline & discipline us: teach us to love: as thou hast loved us: make us Faithful & effective disciples - through J.C. our Lord: who taught us to pray saying